



League of Arab States

TOWARDS AN ARAB URBAN AGENDA



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Foreword

League of Arab States

The League of Arab States has established strong and effective cooperation with the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), manifested in meetings and forums held by the two organizations in the field of housing and urban development. These relations have witnessed significant progress after the establishment of the Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS) in 2012.

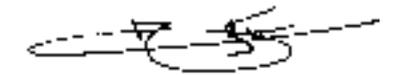
The 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) has been a milestone event also for the Arab region in addressing sustainable development at the local level.

Through the development and implementation of various initiatives and cooperation opportunities with national and local governments across all Arab states, a special relationship with UN-Habitat has been maintained in the field of housing and sustainable urban development, culminating into realization of visions and strategies for housing and sustainable urban development policies.

In this context, the two partners worked together to elaborate an *Arab Urban Agenda*, which illustrates the efforts and ambitious initiatives undertaken by Arab countries in the field of housing and urban

development to raise economic growth rates and encourage more balanced and inclusive economic and social policies aiming at improving the standard of living of Arab citizens. The importance of the *Arab Urban Agenda* lies in presenting the vision of the Arab region for the future pattern of sustainable urban development based on the *Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030*.

In conclusion, I would like to call on UN-Habitat and all Arab States to further cooperation and coordination to take advantage of the opportunities offered by new approaches in the international development agenda, especially the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and the Paris Agreement to combat Climate Change and the New Urban Agenda, the outcome of the 3rd Conference for Housing and Urban Development (Habitat III) in October 2016.



Dr. Djamel Eddine Djaballah

Minister plenipotentiary, Environment, Housing, Water Resources & Sustainable Development Department
League of Arab States



UN-Habitat

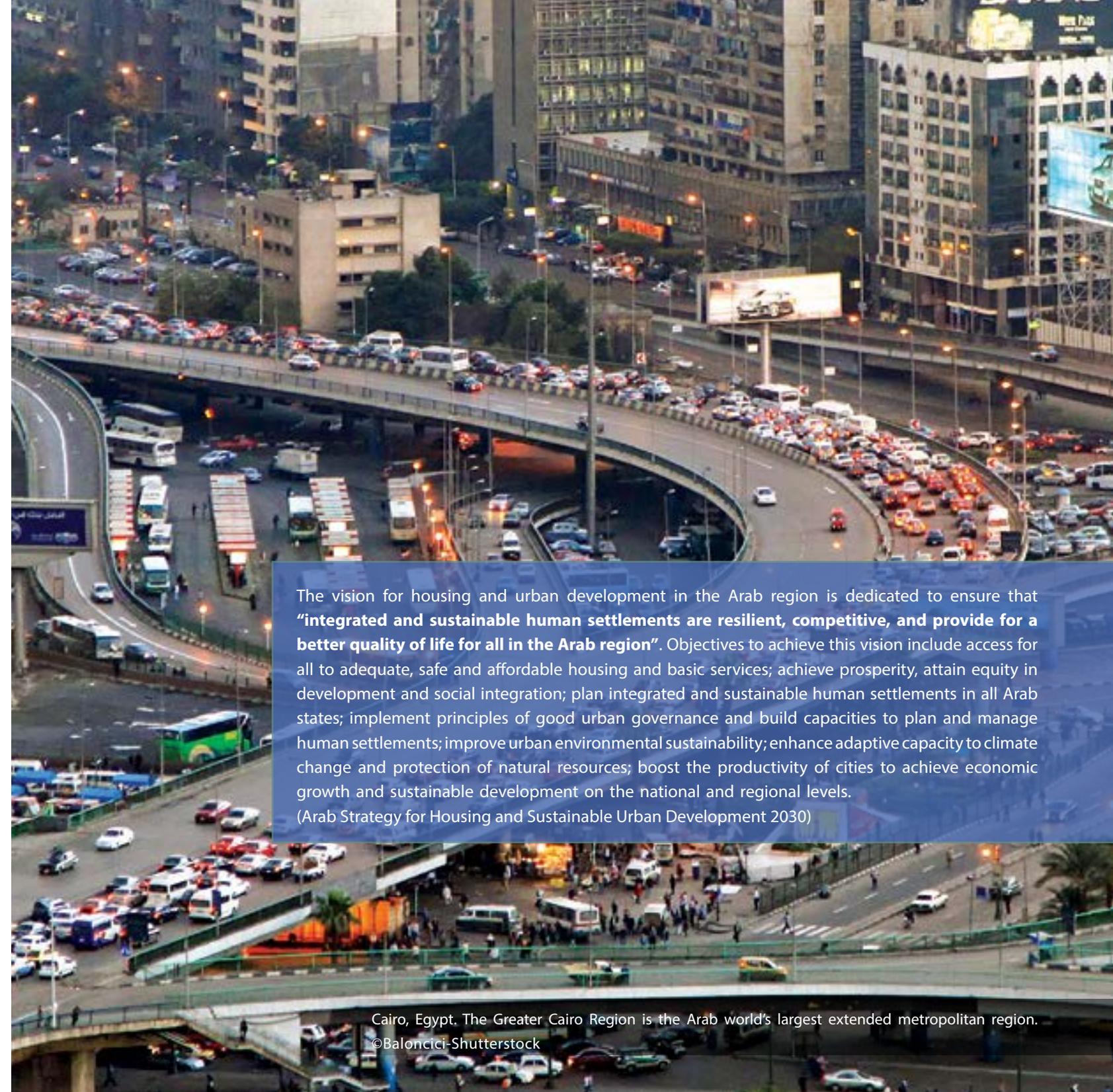
The Arab region is one of the most urbanized regions in the world, with 56 per cent of its residents living in cities. This region, comprising the Maghreb, Mashreq, Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the Southern tier subregions, is currently undergoing remarkable transformations. While some countries are witnessing rapid wealth generation, others are facing economic challenges and conflict, including post-conflict situations, triggering major displacement and migration of large population sections; resulting in significant urbanization trends. These parallel evolutions present a unique opportunity to study urban growth patterns in the Arab region. Urbanization, if well guided, represents a driver for sustainable development. The alternative is a chaotic evolution of towns and cities that would hinder prosperity and social integration. The *Arab Urban Agenda* reflects the efforts of the countries of the region toward the former. In this context, UN-Habitat actively supports the Arab Urban Agenda through ROAS and in close collaboration with Member States. The vision of enhanced environmental, economic and social policies that will ensure sustainable urban development and better living standards for all, including the most disadvantaged, has been instrumental in the formulation of this document. Our cooperation has sought to coordinate urban actors in the Arab region and support systemic urban policy formulation, advocacy, and implementation and monitoring, leading up to Habitat III in 2016 and beyond. In this regard, I commend the process in many of the Arab countries soliciting citizen participation,

through National Urban Forums, National Habitat Committees and the preparation of National Habitat III Reports, which seeks to deepen the ownership of the transformative and people-centered *Arab Urban Agenda*. UN-Habitat's partnership with LAS to strengthen the implementation of the *Sustainable Development Agenda 2030*, especially Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11 - to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, and to advocate for a prosperous Arab society - is also laudable.

It is with great pleasure that I introduce the *Arab Urban Agenda* report, prepared in parallel with the discussions on the *New Urban Agenda*, to articulate a shared view of the Arab region towards Habitat III. Building on the core pillars of the *Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030*, and seeking structural transformation within the Arab region, this document assesses the progress in managing recent urban transformations in Arab countries and addresses the rising urban challenges. The *Arab Urban Agenda* is a crucial contribution of the region to the *New Urban Agenda*. By integrating productive urbanization with macro-economic planning and feeding them into regional integration, the *Arab Urban Agenda* gives all of us much hope and energy for urban transformation in the region.

Joan Clos

Under-Secretary General and Executive Director
United Nations Human Settlements Programme



The vision for housing and urban development in the Arab region is dedicated to ensure that **“integrated and sustainable human settlements are resilient, competitive, and provide for a better quality of life for all in the Arab region”**. Objectives to achieve this vision include access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services; achieve prosperity, attain equity in development and social integration; plan integrated and sustainable human settlements in all Arab states; implement principles of good urban governance and build capacities to plan and manage human settlements; improve urban environmental sustainability; enhance adaptive capacity to climate change and protection of natural resources; boost the productivity of cities to achieve economic growth and sustainable development on the national and regional levels.
(Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030)

Cairo, Egypt. The Greater Cairo Region is the Arab world's largest extended metropolitan region.
©Baloncici-Shutterstock



Currently, an unprecedented opportunity is provided for member states of the United Nations and their populations to shape the urban future of the 21st Century. Every country, every member of civil society and the private sector, along with their governments, is expected to engage vigorously on the state of urbanization in their country, determining what needs to be done to achieve transformative outcomes over the next 20 years.

This report is a resource for citizens and governments in the Arab region as they utilize the opportunity that the Habitat III process opens up. More specifically, the report aims to strengthen Habitat Agenda Partners and other non-state actors in the Arab region in their policy dialogues and capacity-building processes. The report is designed to inform and enrich national level engagements across the Arab region on advancing an Arab Urban Agenda.

The report puts the agenda of Habitat III in the context of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the SDG framework¹ (September 2015), the Conference of the Parties (COP), signatory to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change² (December 2015) and the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development³

(May 2016). Building on ideas and policies that stem from Habitat I in 1976 and Habitat II in 1996, the urban vision for the Arab region is summarized in the LAS formulated Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030.

The SDG agenda is striving to extend the work of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to eliminate extreme poverty and create a development framework that can see more inclusive and sustainable patterns of growth. It explicitly confronts the fact that the current model of extractive growth violates the limits of the global natural resource base and therefore requires 'a radical shift towards more sustainable patterns of consumption, production and resource use. It also recognizes that poverty cannot be disconnected from inequality, which speaks to inequitable access to power and resources globally, regionally, within countries and at local level.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda focus on natural resource limits is also confronted through the debate on climate change, which reaches an important milestone at the Paris (COP 21). With the growing awareness that cities are central to the overall global

effort to address climate variability. There is universal acknowledgement that the current model of economic growth is unsustainable. A new path has to be found that is more environmentally sustainable, socially just and economically inclusive.

The world community is on the edge of a paradigm change in mainstreaming development thinking and practice, in general and its cities in particular. The movement towards a shared Arab perspective on these global debates is vital and this was reflected in the elaboration of the Cairo Declaration on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, the outcome document of the AMFHU1 (December 2015). It refers to both, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Habitat III, hereby outlining the Arab position to a universal New Urban Agenda.

It is anticipated that this will be addressed through the SDGs, the respective "Urban Goal" and other relevant targets, imperative to action at the local level and city scale where the complex challenges of development meet and are concentrated. It is with this global opportunity in mind that the Arab Strategy for Housing and Sustainable Urban Development 2030 outlines a vision for the Arab region and takes concrete steps for its implementation and monitoring. Its main objectives for implementation are:

1. Ensuring access to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services, and prosperous living for all.

2. Ensuring equity and social integration.
3. Planning integrated and sustainable human settlements in all states in the Arab region.
4. Applying the principles of good urban management, and capacity building for planning and managing human settlements.
5. Improving urban environmental sustainability and resilience against climate change, and preserving natural resources.
6. Enhancing cities productivity to achieve economic growth and sustainable development at the national and regional levels.

The Habitat III will result in a concise, focused, forward-looking and action-oriented document, which shall reinvigorate the global commitment to and support for housing and sustainable urban development and the implementation of a New Urban Agenda. The Arab preparations and positioning for Habitat III provides an excellent opportunity to project ideas on how inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and towns can unlock the region's potential.

First, it is important to consider what the Habitat Agenda involves and what the specificities of the Arab urban condition are. By considering material conditions on the ground, future trends and normative imperatives for sustainable urban development, the specific priorities of an Arab Urban Agenda will be clarified for analysis, debate and common action.

¹UN. 2030. Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. United Nations. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/20%21252030Agenda20%for20%Sustainable20%Development20%web.pdf>

²UNFCCC. 2015. Historic Paris Agreement on Climate Change. <http://newsroom.unfccc.int/unfccc-newsroom/finale-cop21/>

³UNESCWA. 2016. Arab Forum for Sustainable Development. <https://www.unescwa.org/arab-forum-sustainable-development2016->

1- Arab Urbanization:

Trends and Prospects

1.1. Housing, Basic Services and Infrastructure

The housing, basic services and infrastructure sector are considered to be one of the key areas in achieving sustainable urban development. It requires effective and feasible policies and strategies that enable adequate housing for all and sustainable urban development in the Arab region. This is emphasized in the Arab Charter on Human Rights which states in its 38th Article, "Every person has the right to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, which ensures their well-being and a decent life, including food, clothing, housing, services and the right to a healthy environment. The States parties shall take the necessary measures commensurate with their resources to guarantee these rights".

Accordingly, some Arab countries have made significant progress in increasing the supply of affordable housing, and eradicating informal and poor areas through upgrading and resettlement programs, implemented in partnership by public institutions and the private sector.

In general, the supply of formal housing for low and middle income categories has decreased in many Arab countries as a result of the absence of adequate housing finance mechanisms for all income levels, in addition to the limited capacity of public private

partnerships to provide adequate housing, the increasing housing prices owing to the imbalance between supply and growing demand, compounded by the rising speculation, lengthy and exorbitant property registration process and legal barriers to mortgage lending. In consequence, the constant population increase drives urban pressures to hazardous or unsafe areas or substandard buildings.

At the same time, social housing programs have been criticized in some countries for being located far away from employment opportunities, basic, commercial and public services, with insufficient public transport and incomplete facilities.

In most Arab countries, governments encounter the challenge of providing urban basic services and infrastructure to sustain the increasing urbanization trends.

Cities lack recourses and management capacities to cope with the growing demand for drinking water and sanitation, energy, public transport, public facilities, healthcare and education facilities, mostly manifested in rural areas.

Social Housing in Arab countries

Arab countries seek to ensure the right to adequate, safe and healthy housing for their citizens in order to preserve human dignity and achieve social justice. In this context, a number of social housing projects were implemented in order to provide subsidized housing units and small plots of land for low and low middle-income families in new urban areas through a funding mechanism that takes into account the limited state budget.

To do so, legislations were issued to identify funding sources, and prosecute people convicted of social housing fraud (tenants who have access to more than one unit, unlawful commercial use of units, unqualified as per the eligibility requirements...). Social housing areas are located within the urban approved areas for cities and remote villages, far from dangerous and unsafe areas and nearby places of public services and equipped with basic facilities. Also, the location should be vacant and directly linked to existing road networks. Miscellaneous ownership patterns (such as ownership, rental arrangements) are available to suit the financial viability of the different social segments and take into account the low-income and other vulnerable groups based on the principle of non-discrimination.



A residential area in Mogadishu, Somalia. ©Kate Holt-IRIN

Key issues:

Inability of the public sector to meet the growing needs for adequate and affordable housing. Increase in the costs of serviced land, prepared for housing construction. Lack of housing finance mechanisms. Inconsistency between access to basic services and international planning standards. Increasing gap between the demand and supply of housing for low-income groups in addition to scarce distribution of units. Lack of housing stock management system to ensure maintenance and utilisation of all units. Lack of an integrated approach to housing and employment opportunities. Lack of provision of housing for middle and low income groups by the private sector. Weak partnership between public and private sector in providing infrastructure. Disbursed housing unit ownership pattern, alongside limited safe and affordable rental stock. High price for construction materials and limited application of state-of-the-art and sustainable building technologies. Inadequate access of wider population to safe water and sanitation. Lack of efficient and adequate public transport and road networks.



1.2. Urban Demographics

Some Arab states set strategies to dedicate investments to secondary and new cities in order to improve urban-rural linkages and achieve equitable economic development across the country. However, uneven development persists as a major challenge facing most countries of the region, given the limited effects of official rural development plans. Most of the urban dwellers in Arab states live in major urban communities that offer job opportunities and social services, resulting in rural-urban migration, hereby moving from small cities to medium and larger cities.

Social transformations and uneven economic development have led to an increase in labor migration within and across the Arab countries, in addition to displacement induced by man-made and natural causes such as political instability or climatic conditions, as well as foreign occupation, the degradation of security in numerous Arab and neighboring countries.

Growing urbanization rates and the imbalance in the distribution of population density as well as immigration within and across countries is one of the triggers of emerging informal settlements at the urban peripheries, often encroaching on agricultural land. Moreover, social inequality is a challenge across the region, mostly aggregating in Arab cities. It is reflected in high levels of unemployment, especially amongst

females, the marginalization elderly, persons with disabilities, and the limited education options for



An Aerial View of the Za'atri Refugee Camp ©Jordan M P I C

low-income groups due to irregular government expenditure in the education sector.

With approximately 60 per cent of the population below the age of 25, most Arab countries have not been able to adequately address the issue of generating employment opportunities for youth, widely due to the lack of resources and supporting mechanisms, besides exclusion of youth from decision-making processes. Hence, strengthening the role of youth as a development partner should be reconsidered in order to empower them to participate in development processes and decrease the negative effects, such as the spread of violence and terrorism. Furthermore, the role of women in development is to be encouraged.



A displaced family carries aid material in a sponge bed in an IDP camp in Abu Ghriab area, western Baghdad. ©Contributor-IRIN



IDP Camp in Basra, Iraq ©ImarIskan.gov.iq

Refugees and displacement impact in the Arab region

Recently, many Arab countries have witnessed unprecedented flows of forced migration and displacement caused by political or economic conditions, affecting their living standards and increasing their burden as host countries, in terms of maintaining sustainable economic growth for their local citizens and providing protection and decent living for refugees. Shelter is among the most important people's needs. Most of the arriving refugees reside in unsafe areas straining the already scarce resources of the receiving countries or risk to jeopardize their development efforts.

In this regard, the international community should provide more assistance to the host countries to help them to compensate for the negative consequences and costs incurred by these large concentrations of refugees. Efforts should also be extended to putting an end to the rising conflicts in the region that affect the living standards of their societies and finding lasting solutions to the refugees problems.

Key issues:

Imbalance in population density distribution. Increase in rural-urban immigration. Displacement caused by occupation, security issues, and natural and man-made disasters. Limited women and youth contribution to development processes. Inequitable development between rural and urban areas. Increasing poverty rates in urban areas. High rates of population growth.



1.3. Land and Planning

A number of Arab countries have implemented an inclusive and integrated approach for the planning of new cities as a driver for economic development, hereby linking housing to employment and provide sustainable transportation solutions by applying a metropolitan planning approach. Moreover, countries have attempted the preparation of strategic development plans for cities with thorough consultation of development partners. In order to achieve local development objectives, the empowerment of civil society organizations and increased participation of the private sector is vital in the implementation of neighbourhood, urban and regional plans, hereby also taking into account historical and archaeological sites. Research in some countries revealed the need to link economic planning with spatial planning, urban management and the planning for the provision of basic services. The discrepancy between the institutional structures and the theoretical curricula for sustainable

and protection of natural resources against hazardous encroachment on agricultural land.



Informal settlement in Bagdad, Iraq. ©Imarlskan.gov.iq

LAS, in its Charter on Human Rights (Article 31, 2004), states that “everyone has a guaranteed right to own private property, and shall not under any circumstances be arbitrarily or unlawfully divested of all or any part of his property”. With the horizontal expansion of urban communities, population density decreases, class stratification increases as the low-income people settle



Informal Housing, Algiers, Algeria. ©Mhuv.gov.dz



Housing for informal dwellers relocation, Algiers. ©Mhuv.gov.dz

Unplanned neighborhoods in Arab countries

Slums and unplanned neighborhoods are a global urban phenomenon, consisting of various forms, patterns and scales. In some Arab countries, unplanned neighbourhoods or informal settlements are mostly characterized by lack of public facilities and services, inaccessibility given by its narrow streets and environmental and social degradation. Among the slums areas observed in the region, we can identify severely deteriorated neighborhoods (huts, shanties ...) or illegal substandard neighborhoods built on private or unlawfully occupied land.

In the framework of the efforts of Arab governments to eradicate poverty and exclusion in urban areas and promote social integration, many have sought to implement national strategies to address the problem of housing through a holistic, participatory and gradual approach. This included preparing an inventory and classification of high-risk areas as a priority according to their degree of risks. Dwellers will be relocated to new and improved neighborhoods well connected to public services and utilities. Among the good practices in Arab countries, we can cite for example, but not limited to, “Villes sans bidonvilles (Cities without Slums)” program, applied in the Kingdom of Morocco since 2004; the “Informal Settlements Development Facility”, founded in Egypt in 2008; the five-year plan to eliminate slums in Algeria since 2007, and finally, the National Program for Slum Rehabilitation implemented by the Republic of Iraq.

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